

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF ETHNOGRAPHY IN SOURCING MATERIAL FOR FILM AND THEATRE PRODUCTION: NIGERIA AS A CASE STUDY

Akinmayowa Akin-Otiko, Halima Amali,
Oluwatoyin Olokodana-James, Ayodele Luqman Yusuff

Abstracts

There have been concerns about the quality of movie scripts and production implicitly because some films and dramas do not represent African realities. This has been the concern of many experts and members of the audience after viewing some Nollywood movies. The team of researchers from on a Tetfund project entitled, *Engaging Social Media in Remodeling Character Through Arts and Culture* used ethnography as a method, in sourcing their material for 52 episodes of radio and television skits. This was done in order to avoid the observed misrepresentation of African realities in movies and dramas. This paper argues for the use of ethnography as a reliable method of sourcing data for movies, film skits and social media production, especially when the context of such skits and movies are cultural. This research adopted ethnography as its method of data gathering. There were field travels to properly identify communities and elders to be interviewed. Researchers conducted workshops in University of Lagos and University of Abuja (host institutions). In each community, selected elders were interviewed to ensure that the content of the 52-episode series of 10 minutes radio and video drama titled 'The Road' were reflective of African reality. To test the efficacy of ethnography, the produced skits series were broadcast and the audience responded that the content reflected African reality. All the produced contents were broadcast on social media and traditional media spaces frequently visited by young Nigerians. The principle of *iroyin ko to afoju ba* (reportage is not equal to personal experience) was adopted as the theoretical framework. The gathered data elaborately addressed the peculiar issues and challenges that are faced by the host region of each selected university. And the data made the production reflect reality as much as possible. Since the

issue of arm-chair movie producers was discouraged, the engagement and feedback were significantly positive.

Key words: African reality, Ethnography, Folktales, Movie productions, Nollywood,

Introduction

African realities have been represented by different people in different ways. Two of the ways in which African realities have been represented include theater production and filmmaking. These media have helped in communicating messages and meanings of African culture and realities to different audiences in and outside Africa. Although,

At first glance, theatre and film may appear to be very similar mediums of entertainment since they both focus primarily on audiovisual storytelling through performance. ... they are two different art forms. The biggest difference is the fact that theatre is a live and ever-changing art form while film is recorded, and thus stays the same every time you watch it (Bryce 2023:1).

These methods of communicating African realities have been critiqued as misleading because many of those who have interpreted and represented African realities through them have either never been to or lived in Africa. And those that have been to or lived in Africa have no clear understanding of African realities that they present in movies or drama. Many movie producers go on personal retreats and come up with what they think African realities are and in some cases, the realities presented in movies were generated from discussion over a drink or during general conversations.

This lack of depth in data gathering has led to different interpretations of African realities, many of which are far from the reality the producers try to represent. These anomalies are evident in some Nollywood movies. Adejumobi (2002) avers that while mainstream Nollywood films are socio-cultural, educational, and entertainment-

oriented, the movies and the industry, in general, have been criticized for their lack of artistic content, immorality, character stereotypes, and negative portrayal of contemporary Nigerian culture (87-88). This misrepresentation of African realities has made “the critics of Nollywood perceive their task as one of correcting the erroneous and banal way that Nollywood films represent Nigeria to its own public, to Africa, and to the rest of the world.” (Okome, 2010:6).

The perspective of critics is further corroborated by Ekwuazi, who succinctly describes Nollywood as branding the “country [Nigeria] as a land of occultists, drug barons, swindlers and go-go girls”. (2017:134-125). To make the misrepresentation worse, Christian evangelical movies condemn African realities as evil, fetish and things to be avoided and possibly eradicated, once they are not compatible with Christian teachings. Many Christian evangelicals seem to uphold strict spiritual obligations, which are now being further developed with different Orthodox, indigenous churches (*Aladura*), and Pentecostals adopting the genre as a means of communicating biblical mysteries, miracles, and moral values. Unfortunately, in the words of Ekhareafu, et al., (2018) “Evangelical video films are not seen as veritable tools of evangelism” (143), they misrepresent African realities as evil.

It is in view of these observations that it becomes important to note that the presentation of African realities by many Nollywood movies and skits highlights contradictions that are not limited to interpretations. Akin-Otiko noted that “between the Christian and traditional Yoruba perception of African realities” (2024:1) producers represent cultures in their movies based on individual perception and not reality. Some movies represent emic interpretations of African cultures, which are the interpretations and understandings shared within the social group (from the perspective of the subject), those that still see African realities from the point of view of African religions. According to Kottak, “the emic approach investigates how local people think...” (2006:47). This, for Akin-Otiko, is how Africans themselves “perceive and categorize the world, their rules for behaviour, what portends meaning for them, and how they imagine and explain things.” (2024:1). The emic approach fulfills the aim of ethnography.

In spite of these visible misrepresentations of African realities, Nollywood movies or dramas still remain a veritable means of communicating African realities, provided that due diligence is taken all through the stages of production. There is a huge need to pay attention to the data used in developing the content of social media and movies because there are claims that social media acts directly to shape and organize culture. More so, one can say that the impact of social media is stronger than religion's impact, because many in recent times have come to know things due to the stories seen and heard through the social media. Therefore, "social media, which is the core of the new information technology, fulfills the interactive element of human communication." (Ozukum, 2021:1). Since Nollywood industry covers and flourishes within an array of thematic prisms and subject matters ranging from Africa's traditional cultural diversity, histories, rites and rituals, spirituality, violence, gender and wealth, education, morality, fertility, and so on, it becomes important to develop data from the source and not just rely on the social media. This is why Ayo Yusuff, et. al. (2021) have chosen ethnography as a method of gathering data for the production of drama skits to communicate African morality/reality in ways that will reflect authentic African reality. This paper examines ethnography as a means of collecting data on African realities, in order to avoid being misrepresented in movies, drama and skits.

Literature review

African realities: African reality covers the whole spectrum of existence and survival of Africans on the continent as well as in the diaspora. These realities include politics, economics, social issues, security, and extends to religious realities. This description is not ignoring the fact that Africa has had, as part of her reality, effects of global activities.

Africa is more vulnerable than most parts of the world because of the internal conflicts, governance and leadership crisis, crises of value, economic difficulties (not least because of international trade opportunity imbalance, gross trade deficit, mismanagement, unhealthy competition, and negative exploitation of

resources), as well as crises to do with social progress and diseases (with which, besides the biggest killers like malaria and TB, we contend much more than the rest of the world with the threat of HIV/AIDS, water-borne diseases, and more recently, Ebola). In addition, Africa faces, at all levels of society, the threats of religious and ethnic conflicts, as well as political differences and expediency - which often marginalizes, discriminates against, and abuses the goodwill of the masses (Galgalo, 2018:76).

Ethnography: The term ethnography is from Greek terms; *éthnos* which means folk, people, nation and *gráphō*, which means, I write. Ethnography encompasses the ways in which authors describe and analyse foreign cultures (Almagor & Skinner, 2013). According to Krupat, ethnography is a branch of anthropology and the systematic study of individual cultures. Ethnography explores cultural phenomena from the point of view of the subject of the study. Ethnography is also a type of social research that involves examining the behaviour of the participants in a given social situation and understanding the group members' own interpretation of such behaviour. (Krupat, 2023). In the view of John Brewer (2000), ethnography becomes important as a data collection method, designed to capture the "social meanings and ordinary activities" of people (informants) in "naturally occurring settings" that are commonly referred to as "the field". The goal is to collect data in such a way that the researcher imposes a minimal amount of personal bias in the data. (Brewer, 2000:10).

Nollywood: The Nigerian Nollywood Industry, which patterned its designation from Hollywood and Bollywood industries (Onuzulike 2015:25; Olokodana-James and Adedina, 2017: 437), has its roots in the works of the stalwart film producer, Hubert Ogunde, who created the foundation upon which the industry debuted. Nollywood is recognised as one of Nigeria's fastest-growing economies, with about 522 billion naira estimated at 3 million US dollar market potential (Odugbemi 2010: 46). The industry basks and flourishes within an array of thematic prisms and subject matters ranging from Africa's traditional

cultural diversity, histories, rites and rituals, spirituality, violence, gender and wealth, education, morality, fertility, and so on. This industry is designed to capture Africa's cultural realities from pre-colonial to post-colonial contemporary epochs. As a profound subject for investigative research, the film industry has attracted many discourses from renowned scholars in Africa and beyond, some of whom have identified and periodized the industry into three emergent schools of films (Ogunsuyi 2007:21-39) preceded by Ogunde's works. These include early Yorùbá films, which incorporated indigenous Yorùbá expressions and the travelling theatre into its film traditions (Haynes and Okome 1997: 23-24). The Hausa film culture has aided the prevalence of Indian film culture while projecting "the relative hermeticism of Islam" (Ekwuazi 2017:57), and the indigenous secular romance performance tradition widespread in Northern Nigeria (Adejumobi 2002: 78). The Igbo school constituted the third part and had a proportionate percentage with the first and second, despite its late emergence. However, the upsurge of Pentecostalism in Nigeria and the indigenization of Christian theology ushered in a novel religious innovation to Nollywood film culture in Nigeria: the Christian evangelical film mission. The origin of this innovation cannot be disconnected from the traditions laid down by Mike Bamiloye of the Mount Zion Faith Ministry (Haynes 2011:76). This set of films treats specific aspects of African culture and Christian Theology. This circle of developments parallels the mainstream Nollywood film projections and forms but may differ operationally in treating concepts related to values and spirituality.

Social media: Boyd and Ellison define social network sites as "web-based services that allow individuals to (i) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system (ii) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (iii) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system." (Boyd & Ellison, 2007:210). "Social media are interactive technologies that facilitate the creation, sharing and aggregation of content (such as ideas, interests, and other forms of expression) amongst virtual communities and networks" (Kietzmann and Hermkens (2011:241).

This, therefore, means that social media can be described as a form of mass media communication that helps users to share information. Through social media, users are able to network and build virtual communities among themselves. Social media is the interactive space where most young people are exposed to ideas that influence their worldview. Social media comprises an aggregate of information and communication technology-related platforms that allow for community-based input, interaction, content sharing and collaboration, particularly through websites and dedicated applications, all of which provide room for substantial feedback.

According to Onu (2024), Blossom Chukwujekwu (2009) explores the impact of social media on culture and explains, with particular reference to millennials, both the importance and the urgency of understanding this winning vehicle of expression. For Blossom, not only is social media a driver of culture, it is also a veritable culture, even a nation, of and on its own, and anybody below the age of 25 must be regarded as a citizen of that nation, born, as one commentator has put it, into the digital world. Traditional media, therefore, have become less effective in reaching this nation of digital millennials and teaching them the time-honoured moral and cultural values that foster a much more cohesive social order in times past. (Onu 2024).

Theory

The principle of *iroyin ko to af'aju ba* (reportage is not equal to personal experience) is adopted as the theoretical framework for this paper. This principle is commonly used by journalists, first to gather data to be reported as first responders; second, to authenticate news or data that already exist in order to confirm what is to be presented; and third, to own the data or fact that is to be reported as straight from the source. This principle is adopted as a framework for this paper to help overcome the menace of arm-chair research and scriptwriting, especially when it concerns African realities. The aim of the TETFund project, *Engaging Social Media in Remodeling Character Through Arts and Culture* (Yusuff, et al., 2021) required a representation of facts in such a way that African moral lessons and realities that are derivable

from folktales were sourced from African communities first-hand to ensure that the data gathered and presented in the research represented reality as much as possible.

The theoretical framework employed in this paper also aligns properly with ethnography. Beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, ethnographic research methods began to be widely used by communication scholars. The purpose of ethnography is to describe and interpret the shared and learned patterns of values, behaviours, beliefs, and language of a culture-sharing group; as Agar (1996) noted that ethnography is both a process and an outcome of the research.

Statement of Problem

One of the ways in which morality has been affected is the available content on social media and the Nollywood movies which are products of etic interpretation of African realities. This has done two things among others: first, it has fermented the miscommunication of African realities, and second, it has perpetrated wrong interpretations of African realities. To correct these views and improve the level of morality among young people in Nigeria, the project entitled, *“Engaging Social Media in Remodeling Character Through Arts and Culture”* was designed to employ arts and culture in remodelling the character of millennials through the engagement of social media. This became necessary as the older generation began to fear for the character of the younger Nigerian generation. To change this narrative, this project proposed a template that would expose young people to character formation through the use of social media that they find appealing. To achieve the aim of this project, the researchers agreed to prioritise skits that portray moral lessons that are found in African folktales as against the method used by arm-chair producers and filmmakers who do not engage in ethnography before producing their movies. Ethnography as a method was adopted to avoid “etic interpretations of cultures, and these are the interpretations and understandings shared among persons from outside (from the perspective of the observer)” (Akin-Otiko, 2024:1). The choice of ethnography as a method of data gathering by the team members has

shown that African realities can be interpreted and presented in movies and short skits in ways that closely represent African reality. Although Africa is one, ethnography has the capacity to identify and represent different cultures that respond to the same realities. The data gathered were presented in drama skits and television programmes to depict true African reality, different from what is available that does not reflect true African reality. This lack is significantly linked to the absence of ethnography in sourcing the data.

Methodology

In order to achieve the stated goals of this research, the team organised workshops and seminars to gather data on the most acceptable and mostly used social media by young Nigerians. These platforms became the avenue for dissemination. Thereafter, field travels were carried out in the South West and North Central states of Nigeria. These field trips helped to properly identify potential content creators, interview identified old persons who narrated relevant folklores, and engage millennials to design platforms and programmes that are interesting to their age mates. The folklores were meant to provide data that would address i) social media abuse, ii) character formation, iii) corruption, iv) human trafficking v) religious intolerance, vi) child abuse, vii) drug abuse, viii) work ethics, ix) discipline, and ix) degradation. The ethnic groups visited for ethnographic studies include: Gbagyi and Alago (North Central) and Ogu and Yoruba (South West) in Nigeria.

The findings were analysed and developed into a 52-episode series of 10 minutes radio and video drama titled 'The Road'. The content of the skits were designed to draw the attention of youths to the peculiar issues and challenges that are faced by the host regions. This method was designed to help revisit moral systems of the past in order to remodel character, using the social media that millennials know and love as vehicles for lessons in character formation. All produced content (radio plays, video editions, and stage plays) are available on social media and traditional media spaces that are frequently visited by young Nigerians.

For analysis, social media feedback activity indicators such as number of likes, dislikes, comments, views, shares, and retweets were collected and digitally counted to measure the success of the project, especially the reliability of ethnography as a veritable means of gathering data for film and skit productions.

Result

Status Report: 2020 NRF TETFUND Social Media Campaign (November 25, 2024 - December 31, 2024).

Social media outlets and their engagements:

	Instagram	Facebook	YouTube
Impressions	29,500	77,000	4,898
Views	17,100	60,200	
Net followers	550	399	
Content interaction (likes, comment, shares)		1,600	
Subscribers			549
Watch time			49.1 hours

This report analyses the performance of a cross-platform social media campaign conducted on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. The five weeks campaign achieved significant reach and engagement across all platforms, with notable growth in followers, views and impressions. Instagram led in terms of engagement and follows, while Facebook dominated in terms of reach and video views. YouTube, though smaller in scale, demonstrated steady growth in subscribers and watch time. (2020 NRF-TETFUND PROJECT Report, 2024).

The online feedback addressed the viewership of the presented data. In order to assess the success of ethnography, the 2024/2025 MA students of the Institute of African and Diaspora Studies, University of Lagos were selected to watch the skits and thereafter interviewed on the suitability of the production and representation of African reality. The findings show that ethnography as a method of data collection is

effective as the 23 students agreed that African reality was properly represented in the skits that were produced.

Discussion

Employing ethnography to generate data has inexorably led to findings that show that ethnography produces data that closely represents African reality. More Nigerian youths have also responded to ethnography-generated materials on social media with marked interest. Ethnography then becomes a veritable means of representing African reality found among youths. The size of engagement, and particularly watch time, shows the impact of ethnography in generating what is real and what interests people. “The campaign successfully achieved its objectives across Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, with each platform contributing uniquely to the overall strategy. Instagram drove engagement and follower growth. Facebook maximized reach and views, and YouTube built a dedicated subscriber base.” (2020 NRF-TETFUND PROJECT Report, 2024).

As observed in the Nagel Institute project (2021), entitled; *Engaging African Realities: Integrating Social Science within African Theology*, the originality of the data was not significantly affected, as ethnography and the analysis ensured “commitment to a truthful and unexaggerated reflection of the societies and challenges that it proposes to present.” The editorial work on the created content kept fidelity to the data gathered from the field. African realities, in this case, moral lessons were interpreted by scholars and movie producers from different interpretative lenses to suit different purposes. Originality is important as movies were produced from different perspectives even when the same realities were being presented. Mike Bamigboye, a respondent on the Nagel project opined that

Although we speak to the same reality, I believe that there are more differences than similarities. We are from the angle of spirituality, whereas Nollywood comes from the entertainment angle. Nollywood basically wants to entertain the audience, we don’t just want to entertain, we want to ‘evangetain’ that is evangelism and

entertainment because we are not just evangelizing like when you watch a film you get entertained (Mike Bamigboye, 2021).

This observation is responsible for the obvious differences in the interpretations of Mount Zion Movies and Nollywood movies about African realities. The producers of Mount Zion Movies presented African realities as things that need to be changed and that practitioners of many of the African realities need repentance. It was observed that “there are two key influencers in the way producers of Mount Zion Movies view African reality, and this may be applicable to film producers who work from a Christian perspective. There is the personal perspective and the evangelical perspective.” (Akin-Otiko, 2024:10). These make it imperative to have ethnographic research to gather data in order to have movies that are produced reflect Africa’s realities in ways that are closest to African reality, especially the emic knowledge and interpretations that exist within a culture and are part of a local custom and belief system (Ager, & Loughry, 2004).

This is why ethnography becomes essential to gathering data for movie production and script writing. “In ethnography, the researcher gathers what is available, what is normal, what it is that people do, what they say, and how they work” (Preece, et. al. 2015: 34). Field work and real life experiences have shown that some realities are best described by a 'native', or someone from within the culture in question. It is on this note that ethnography becomes vital to the understanding and the gathering of data when representing African realities because “etic interpretations and appreciation of the same African realities, affect how these realities are presented in movies and by extension taught in theater and religious studies courses in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.” (Akin-Otiko, 2024:2). It is of significant note that all the students that reviewed the skits agreed that they reflect African realities. This justifies the relevance of ethnography in gathering data for movies and skits that are about African realities.

Conclusion

In order to achieve the aim of documenting, representing and, in the case of this paper, remodelling characters, one has to be original and authentic, particularly because more research are needed to correct the disconnect between the information that the present generation of young people receive via the social media and information from Nollywood movies. It is also important to engage media of dissemination that interest young people in order to reach them with the message that can reshape their character and inculcate in them cultural lessons in African reality for the purpose of character formation. This is why ethnography is best suited as found and used in this research. Garson (2015) emphasises that “traditionally, the ethnographer focuses attention on a community, selecting knowledgeable informants who know the activities of the community well.” (1).

The produced skits will serve as content for existing university radio and television stations for programmes that interest youths and, at the same time, remodel and sustain good character. More importantly, these African reality programmes will be anchored by youths who see them as effective tools on social media.

Recommendations

The produced skits are to be adopted by tertiary institution based TV and radio stations. These stations are to serve as media of dissemination to impact the lives of young Nigerians.

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